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ABSTRACT

Outcomes of the Performance-Based Diploma (BPD) Program, a program implemented at a high school in the southeast United States, are described in this paper. The basic elements for success are people, program design, and product. Staff function on the belief that teachers exist to meet students' needs. The program includes the following components: flexible scheduling, caring and competent teachers, an individualized academic curriculum, self-paced computer-assisted instruction, vocational training opportunities, counseling, no grades, and innovative student discipline policies. The program has retained 75-80 percent of its students each year. Participating students pass the GED and acquire vocational and coping skills. (LMI)

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PERFORMANCE-BASE DIPLOMA PROGRAM; AN AWARD-WINNING APPROACH TO DROPOUT PREVENTION

PRESENTATION FOR THE NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
April 26, 1992

Judy A. Jones
(Presentation following Gary Lindsey, moderator; Pat Trimble presenting the history and components; Dr. Gary Norris presenting the involvement of the business and community)

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Dr. Norris and Pat have so thoroughly given you the philosophy and history of the program that has transformed my teaching philosophy and enthusiasm. Having taught in eight different high schools, I was on the verge of burn-out until I heard the Performance-Based Program described. I had been a dean at a large Florida high school in the 70's. The emphasis was not on keeping students in school so much as attempting to force them to fit into our educational mold. The idea was to "teach the best and forget the rest." I counseled many students into taking the GED and getting a job. There was no alternative for them. As I heard about the Performance-Based Program that day six years ago, I knew that if I had had this alternative to offer those students who did not fit into our traditional mold, I would not have contributed so greatly to the drop-out rate.

What I have seen happen to students in the past six years has been incredible. As we have implemented and refined the PBD program and as we have experimented with making various changes, my enthusiasm for teaching has been rekindled; I have watched young people who were unsuccessful in the traditional curriculum and were labeled as dropouts and failures change their attitudes to school, authority figures, themselves, and education and take the responsibility to make a success for themselves.

When people see our statistics, they are usually impressed. The dropout rate in our district has been cut in half since the inception of the program; we keep 75 - 80 percent of our students in school each year; our graduates are employed and successful citizens. The Southern Association of Colleges selected our program as one of the top ten drop-out prevention programs in the Southeast. The vocational High Tech Council ranked us as one of the top six vocational programs in the state. We have had over 600 educators, politicians and business persons from all over the Southeast to view

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the program. Their number one question is, "What is it that makes the program so successful?" As I have pondered this question, I have concluded that it is the PEOPLE, the PROGRAM DESIGN, and the PRODUCT. These three elements working together, create an atmosphere in which students can experience success.

The first component of success is the people...all the people involved The teachers selected for this program have the basic personality qualities that research shows are necessary for reaching disenchanted young people. Our principal is very careful, even in this time of budget crunch to make certain that our teachers have these qualities: EMPATHETIC, WARM, RESPECTFUL, CONCRETE, GENUINE, APPROPRIATELY SELF-DISLOSE, CONFRONTIVE AND IMMEIDIATE. . As a group, these teachers have developed their own philosophy and mission; they all buy into this philosophy:

"Students choose the PBD program because for some reason they have not experienced success in the traditional curriculum. Our mission is to provide them with an environment and structure which allows and encourages each of them to experience success and to have their needs met. We exist to meet their needs. We wish to provide an environment in which they can learn as well as take responsibility for their learning.

To meet their needs, we provide the following:

- flexible scheduling
  - choose hours
  - choose vocational skill
  - choose teachers
- caring, competent, controlled teachers
- individualized academic curriculum
- self-paced academic curriculum via CAI
- the opportunity to master a vocation
- counseling
- no grades
- new and different methods of dealing with behavior problems

The mission statement continues, but I think that the statement of our expectations for our entering students sums us the attitude of our teachers:

Level one expectation: our first goal is to get the student to enjoy school - to buy back into the educational system which he has rejected. We will try to push every

button we can find within that student, to find the one area, teacher, motivation which will enable him to change
his attitude to school and authority figures.

Level two expectation : the student will have successful experiences vocationally and academically despite their personal problems

Level three expectation: the student will have more successful experiences and will increase his productivity and expand his commitments

Level four expectation: the student will be highly productive; a role model for younger students

Every teacher is committed to finding within the student that which will make him/her stop the negative downward spiral and begin to work his/her way back up. For this, our scheduling is very flexible and a students schedule can be changed at any time; very often an entering student's schedule might be changed five or six times within the first month until we find a schedule which is comfortable for him. I know that this is a travesty in most guidance departments; that is why we have our very own guidance counselor who buys into our philosophy wholeheartedly. We allow the student to reschedule is hours, his courses, and his teachers as much as is possible.

Some of our students might have the same teacher for all of their academics. They might have extra hours of vocational the first year and limited academics or vice-versa.

Additionally we have our own discipline system which is supervised by our Performance-Review Board. This is a group of students, usually seniors, who are at LEVEL FOUR; high productivity and role models for new students. They are elected by their teachers and peers to this board and they mete out the discipline. They have the blessing and support for all of their decisions from our school administration and deans.

These teachers all realize we can no longer do business the way we did in the regular curriculum, and they are committed to finding new ways. They are wonderful human beings--who are just that: human beings. That is why we have a psychologist who meets with us every other week to help up deal with our own problems as well as with the problems of our students. There is a unique

commardarie among our teachers. We do not have the market on great teachers. You have them in your schools, too. They are just buried someplace under all the paperwork and regimentation that has been created in your school system.

In addition to the caring teachers in the program, it has been absolutely essential to have the support of the people sitting at this table and other district and school level administrators. Had it not been for the support of these people, we would have failed. Not only is it very difficult emotionally to work all day with disenchanted students, it is even more difficult to work in an atmosphere of constant criticism. We are doing things very differently within the four walls of a very traditional high school; many traditionalists, both on the faculty and in the administration and on the state level, would like very much to see us fail. Had we as teachers not had the very outspoken support of key district and school level administrators, we would have given up. As we discovered changes that needed to be made, they supported those changes. I EMPHASIZE, the must have your unwavering support or they will not succeed.

Another group of people who have been absolutely critical to our success has been our community. As Dr. Norris has already shared with you, we have strong support from our community and have had ever since the beginning. That support continues to grow and those business people enjoy working with our students and watching the uniqueness of our program. Invariably they say, "I wish they would have had this program when I was in school." I have the joy of seeing our students after they have spent time with their mentors. I see the difference in them from having experienced a successful relationship with an adult role model from our community.

In addition to key PEOPLE, the second component of success has been the design of the program. I can brag about the design because I had absolutely nothing to do with the original design. I have only had the privilege of taking that design and implementing it: the vocational, the academic CAI instruction, and the counseling. The design is like an equilateral triangle. Each component is extremely important and I wouldn't give up any one.

The vocational component is that area which frequently gives the student his first sense of individual accomplishment and pride. Our students love their vocational areas and many of them keep coming to school only to be able to go their vocation. We have a variety, and

sometimes they have to try two or three until they find their niche; but as they become masters in their vocational area, we see a tremendous rise in self esteem which spills over into their academics and attitudes.

The computer-assisted instruction is crucial. I wish you could come to visit our labs. They are among the best learning environments on campus. You would be shocked to walk in unannounced to any one of the three labs and to find thirty-two students, who were the ones who caused problems for the teachers in the traditional curriculum, quiet and working. This change is because they are working toward a goal; they are working at their own pace and at a level that is comfortable but challenging. They know that they have the responsibility to reach their goal and they can reach it as quickly or as slowly as they want and are able.

Each student has a chart in each academic discipline, English, math, social studies and science. He must complete the chart but he is given credit through testing when he enters the program for everything he has already learned on the chart. Our students, for the most part, are very bright. They could have succeeded easily in the regular and honors level classes; but they did not. Here, they are able to succeed for a number of reasons: self-paced, working at their own level of competence, immediate positive feedback; no competition for grades and a teacher who is available to help them individually and to work with them in small groups while others are still at the computer. They have the freedom to work on any one of their curriculums at any time they are in the lab. They are working on higher order thinking skills They know that when they have completed the chart, they no longer have to take that academic discipline whether they finish on October 17, January 6th or April 18th. When they finish, they go to the guidance counselor and a change is made in their schedule for that period. I as the classroom teacher have the opportunity to work one-on-one with the students. The computer has become the authority and I am the mentor. The student sees me as an ally--not as the despised authority figure. I have a good time in my classes. There are some days when I look around my class and everyone is diligently working on their computer; I have to pinch myself to make sure I have not died and gone on to teacher heaven.

The glue that holds the students and the program together is the counseling session. These are not deep therapy sessions run by some

trained psychologist. These are family meetings with a caring teacher as the head of the family. We have twenty-four groups that meet every other day. Each teacher has two groups of ten. One day each week his/ her two groups of ten meet together. We do things that functional families do together. We talk about problems and successes; we celebrate birthdays and other meaningful events; we play; we travel; we eat. Every group is individualistic. The teacher is responsible to track her group of twenty. If one student gets in trouble someplace along the way -- either in or out of school--the teacher along with other group members are the intervention specialists.

The third key ingredient for success is our PRODUCT: our students. You see, these students are some of the warmest, brightest, most-capable young people in our society. But for many of them, life has not offered the support our own children have experienced. They have faced so many difficulties that it is difficult to comprehend that they are even on our campus. But what we see happening is somewhat compared to watching a butterfly emerge from his cocoon. When he comes to us, he is wrapped tightly in a cocoon--shut out from our educational environment. As he emerges, we see a struggle and lots of difficulties. But when he emerges, he is a beautiful being. I am proud of our graduates. I know and can guarantee to the world awaiting them that they are literate. They have passed the GED which research tells us that forty percent of the students who receive a high school diploma cannot pass. They are very skilled in a vocational area because they have mastered the skills and performance standards for at least six classes. And they can cope; they have learned to cope with authority figures and peers who aggravate them in order to reach their goals.

The statistics which I showed you are impressive, but they are not nearly as impressive as the young people who graduate. Those young people cannot be placed on charts that show the turn-arounds that they have made in their lives. Only teachers like myself have the joy of that experience and that experience is difficult to even put into words. So I have brought three of the finished products to give you a slight taste of the wonder I experience each June at graduation.

These three students, one graduate and two current seniors, will share with you their life stories and will explain as best they can what has happened to them in the past two years to change their lives, their attitudes, their futures and their present.